

GEORG BRANDES BETWEEN NATIONS AND NARRATIONS. *INDTRYCK FRA POLEN* FROM A NEW PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Georg Brandes (1842-1927), one of the most influential literary critics in the nineteenth century, was a welcome guest in many Western and Eastern European countries, where he gave lectures on literary topics supporting modern liberal ideas. The Danish scholar was a perceptive observer of foreign cultures and a collector of impressions, which he presented in the form of essayistic narratives. It is interesting to see how his mainly literature-based expectations and preconceptions concerning Eastern European nations intersected with the experiences he had during his travels. While travelling across the divided and colonized Kingdom of Poland – Congress Poland (or Russian Poland) and Galicia (the Austrian Partition) – Georg Brandes came into contact with many local communities spread over a large multi-ethnic territory. Brandes' idea of the Polish nation and the central value of national sovereignty, among other social values, was juxtaposed with the liquid and sometimes confusing reality of local discourses. Analysing Brandes' book *Indtryk fra Polen* (1888) and its contexts, I discuss the problematic status of the key concept of his discourse – the concept of "nation". The analysis focuses on three motifs connected to the three conceptualizations of nation and nationalism (the national independence movement, the nation as an emotional community, and the nation as a cultural resource) in order to show how they shape Brandes' narrative and how it is challenged by other narratives and discourses which, while often referring to the same motifs, promote a different understanding of "nation". Referring to post-structuralism and post-colonial studies, I show how local narratives in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society contest Brandes' rational liberal concept of nation and undermine his narrative.

Keywords

Georg Brandes, Poland, literature, liberalism, nation, narration

Introduction

Georg Brandes (1842-1927) was a passionate traveller. This passion was grounded in his cosmopolitan beliefs and a vivid interest in foreign cultures. Due to the international success of his *Hovedstrømninger i det 19de Aarhundredes Litteratur* (1872-1875), Brandes became a welcome guest in many Western and Eastern European countries, where he gave lectures on literary topics supporting modern ideas. Being a brilliant storyteller, the Danish critic presented his observations from abroad in the form of essayistic narratives. Thus, from "Berlin, Poland, Russia and Greece he wrote book-length travel accounts in which literary and historical surveys are combined with political analyses in reviews, articles and columns" (Larsen, 2012, 24).

Brandes found the national dimension in culture most interesting. In his view, similarities and differences between national cultures reflected those between nations. This claim provided

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the basis for his comparative studies, in which "nation" appears as the key concept. Brandes' understanding of this concept and his liberal narrative in which he formulated the programme for a modern democratic world of free nations, was the "hand baggage" he would carry on his journeys through Eastern and Western Europe (see Houe, 2007).

The purpose of this contribution is to describe Brandes' encounter with Poland on the narrative level, referring mainly to the book *Indtryk fra Polen* (1888, and following extended editions). I will analyse his narrative while taking into account his previous judgements concerning the discourse of nationalism and the problem of subjected nations.

Liberty, civilisation and nations

If we asked Brandes "What is a nation?", he would probably answer that it is a collectivity gathered around an imagined good or an ideal. This is why Brandes considers free Poland to be an ideal, "the conception of something good" (Brandes, 1903, 104-105). This ideal "develops talents", inspires "heroic actions" and is a mighty "civilizing power", because "it produces proud, liberal-minded men". In contrast to Russia and Prussia, Poland "signifies independence, freedom, justice, reason". "Should Poland be definitely lost", claims Brandes, "it would indicate nothing less in principle than that the culture of liberty and liberality in Europe were lost" (1903, 105). In this discourse, the "culture of liberty" is contrasted with Eastern despotism, Western militarism and the politics of colonial oppression.

Brandes places Poland among oppressed peoples ("undertryckte folkeslag"). In its epic fight against "Asian absolutism" and the aggressive politics of Austria and Prussia, Poland represented the ethos of Western civilisation. Brandes saw the situation in colonialised Poland as a state of emergency, in which the constitution guaranteeing complete liberty and equality had been suspended. As the war of civilisations continued, the national resistance would precede political and social modernisation.

Understanding the (Polish) nation

In Brandes' narrative, it is possible to discern three motifs connected with the three conceptualisations of nation and nationalism as described by Anthony D. Smith (2008, 12-27):

- (1) The national independence movement
- (2) The nation as an emotional community
- (3) The nation as a cultural resource

These motifs are reflected in Brandes' narrative concerning Poland when he discusses the situation and the perspective of the Polish national independence movement; emphasises the importance of national feeling as the force that integrates the Poles; or interprets Poland as a cultural resource.

The following analysis will focus on these motifs and show how they shape Brandes' narrative and how it is challenged by other narratives and discourses which, while often referring to the same motifs, promote a different understanding of the "nation".

The national independence movement in Poland

The liberal thinkers of the nineteenth century associated individual freedom and democracy with national independence. According to Brandes, who was a liberal nationalist at the time, Poland's resistance to the Russian Empire – a multinational, despotic, pre-modern State – implies a unification. Paradoxically, to create, or to be more precise, to re-create the diversity supported by liberal theory, a divided, heterogeneous community has to rise up as a unified nation. In his *Indtryk fra Polen*, Brandes emphasises the necessity of unity and outlines the unifying forces. Moreover, he presents himself as an important unifying factor; in fact, as the hub that all "progressive" forces in Poland revolve around. He is aware of the price of unity – the conservative Catholic Church must unite with the "freethinkers" to advance the Polish struggle for freedom inspired by the Italian national revival movement (Risorgimento) (see Jurek, 2012).

All secession implies a moment of violent unification. As observed by Homi K. Bhabha, a nation has to be integrated into a coherent narrative with a distinct protagonist (Bhabha, 1994, 140). It has to be constructed by marking out differences, such as Poles and non-Poles. This distinction between the foreign and the domestic signals the start of an enclosing process which brings alternative narratives to an end.

Brandes tends to downplay national diversity and conflicting narratives in the two last decades of the nineteenth century. He often neglects subaltern, minority narrations which complicate the story of the oppressor and the oppressed, revise national history and shift the perspective. When, in his opinion, Poland had become possessed by the demon of violent nationalism, he reminded the Poles that he had been loyal to them when he refused to meet Ruthenian nationalists in Lemberg (Brandes, 1903, 175-176 and 1917, 98). Likewise, he was reluctant to discuss the situation of the unassimilated Eastern Jews in Galicia before the Great War (Nathansen, 1931, 177). Indeed, Brandes presents quite a homogenous, "unified" picture of the Polish nation in *Indtryk fra Polen*. Before 1901 (the publication year of the essay *Nutidscivilisation*), his narrative does not split into divergent "voices" and "stories". It has one protagonist, who does not have a "split identity". It is the Polish nation that is placed geographically, where the landscapes are transformed into domestic symbols, purified of the foreign element.

According to Brandes, foreign reign (the colonial power) in fact led to a "consolidation of everything Polish". "All provincial differences have vanished in this unity", he states, emphasising a spiritual and national integrity (Brandes, 1903, 41). However, in Galicia, Brandes' narrative clashed with minority discourses strongly supportive of the multi-ethnic Austrian Empire, which complicated the concept of unity.

In his first impressions from Poland, Brandes discusses the problem of the acquisition of land by Poles. He observes that the Poles in the Russian Empire had recently not been allowed to buy land in the eastern part of the former Kingdom of Poland ("old Polish provinces of Lithuania, Podolia, Wolhynia and Ukraina"). The edict dealt a hard blow to the Polish "national affair", Brandes explains, because Lithuania used to be united with Poland and, despite the different language, the country "has felt itself to be a Polish land". It was also home to "many of the leading men of Poland" (1903, 19).

Driven by his empathy and unification discourse, Brandes clearly overlooks the fact that, in this case, we are faced with a conflict of two colonial discourses: Polish and Russian. Lithuania has in fact never considered itself to be Polish territory. This kind of identity is not borne out by the historical past, that is, the union between Poland and Lithuania and the federalist idea of the Commonwealth of Both Nations, but it is an element of modern nationalistic narrative with a strong unifying tendency. The motif of national identity that persists in spite of differences, and the reference to great Polish people, "natives of the region", are the vehicles of this narrative, which challenges the Great Russian narrative but at the same time obscures the Lithuanian discourse.

Nation as an emotional community – the national feeling

Brandes reflects on the emphatic declaration of nationality in his lecture *Om Nationalfølelse* (1894). To him, it generates the feeling of being borne by something mighty – by a strong will. Thus, he develops a romantic vision of a movement driven by a "common consciousness and inspiration". In this narrative, the individual "belongs to a whole", which is growing increasingly larger, and the individual grows along with this whole called "nation" (Brandes, 1902, 187).

However, the national feeling has an aggressive essence. This narrative has a sharp edge to it, directed against those who intervene in the national movement. It implies the possibility of conflict and even war. Brandes' conviction that the national feeling can provide a basis for cosmopolitanism seems to be a mere fantasy – something that only became clear to him at the turn of the century (Knudsen, 2008, 445-447). War is a necessary consequence of the clash of national feelings in full bloom; not only a world war but also a civil war, a conflict between the national majority driven by the same emotions and those who "do not feel the same".

As a rationalist, Brandes notes, albeit somewhat critically, that there is something "feminine" and petulant to Polish patriotism (Brandes, 1903, 32) – it seemed to him that the long years of oppression had led to the hypertrophy of national feelings. For example, he observes a "hate" for foreign writers, who are accused of insulting the Polish nation (1903, 40). Brandes perceives this as an expression of national oversensitivity and weakness. However, it is in fact the strong reaction to "foreign" narratives which weaken or even undermine the emotional community supported by the unifying nationalistic narrative. Criticism and rejection appear as resistance to the narratives which are considered to be subversive and harmful to "the national affair". Ironically, Polish intellectuals almost unanimously united against Brandes' narrative on Poland from 1914, demonstrating the strong national feeling that had awoken in them. This narrative, in which he accuses Poles of participating in pogroms and war crimes against Jews, was soon declared defamatory (see Knudsen, 2008, 558-561). The interpretation of Brandes' narrative in terms of national interest led to a condemnation of the author and his views. His support for Polish nationalism was soon forgotten.

Returning to the problem of national feeling, we may ask a fundamental question: do all Polish-speaking communities really "feel the same?" Both intellectuals and workers? Conservative priests and radical socialists? Jews and Ruthenians? Brandes was aware of the differences. However, he maintains that despite the different self-narratives, there are deep emotional bonds between these communities, which are based in the consciousness of being

oppressed by a foreign colonial power and in collective memory, the "religion of remembrance" (Brandes, 1903, 39). Indeed, the national heritage generates emotions which unite different strata of Polish society making them "feel the same".

The nation as a cultural resource

According to A.D. Smith, a significant aspect of the nation concerns its role in setting a pattern of sociocultural organisation. Seen in a historical context, the nation can be treated as a sociocultural resource (or a set of resources) which, in turn, can be used in different ways and circumstances (Smith, 2008, 22). As such, the Polish nation might be considered a kind of pattern consisting of cultural resources such as customs, symbols, works of architecture and literature.

Some of these resources were used in the liberal narrative of the Risorgimento-like nationalism. After the 1830-1831 uprising against the Russian Empire, Poland became the main protagonist in this narrative, built upon works of art and literature by prominent Polish artists and writers of the Romantic school, creating a widespread image of a colonised territory and a subjected nation threatened with extinction, yet supposed to be capable of rising up. Brandes also interpreted cultural texts which were associated with the Polish nation and regarded these as the cultural resources of "Polish nature". He was impressed with Polish literature, which he considered the source of a narrative that contrasted a patriotism of revenge and death with a patriotism of spiritual perfection and life. The lectures he gave in Warsaw on Polish literature in the nineteenth century (which became part of his book on Poland) were structured by this narrative. The goal of these and other lectures was to evoke the national spirit, which he considered to be an affective reaction to an image of a nation that has had a chance to win its independence. This was an image based upon the literary works of Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), Juliusz Słowacki (1809-1849) and Zygmunt Krasiński (1812-1859), which Brandes read and "retold".

Crucial to this part of my analysis are Brandes' remarks on the Polish national poet Adam Mickiewicz. Brandes finds Mickiewicz's narrative poem *Konrad Wallenrod* (1828) to be "a glorification of dissimulation and treachery in the service of the fatherland" (Brandes, 1903, 234). What we face here is a poetry of vengeance and betrayal, which revolves around the motif of the mask (1903, 261). The Danish critic observes the same attitude in Słowacki's *Lambro* (1833), which is "a glorification of deceit or surprises practiced against the enemy" (1903, 262). Why is there a tendency to describe vengeance and treachery? Brandes highlights the motif of suffering in Polish literature and argues that it has to be complemented by the motif of vengeance, which is generated by the experience of cruelty and persecution. The ethics and aesthetics of resistance represented in *Konrad Wallenrod* are, in Brandes' view, an artistic metonymy of the nation: "persecuted by God and men", it is "entitled to use all means" to save the fatherland (1903, 261). Ivan Franko (1856-1916), a Ruthenian writer and literary critic, turned this metonymy into one of oppression: in his essay on Mickiewicz, the literature of betrayal and vengeance becomes a form of national politics.

Franko, one of the leaders of the Ukrainian national movement in Galicia and at the same time a connoisseur of Polish literature and friend to many Polish writers, wrote a controversial article entitled "Ein Dichter der Verrathes" (The Poet of Betrayal) in 1897. He starts with a

citation from an article by Brandes called "Polnische Romantik", published 1896 in the magazine *Die Zeit*, in which Brandes observed that Mickiewicz and Słowacki glorified betrayal and treacherous subterfuge (Brandes, 1896, 202). Why is it, asks Franko, that not a single Pole had commented on this? If Brandes, a friend to Poland, dared to say that, Franko himself feels free to express some "heretic" thoughts on Mickiewicz – "the greatest Polish poet", regarded as a reincarnation of national genius and an apostle of humanism (Franko, 1897, 86). Let us note the word "heretic" in this context, as it refers to an alternative, non-orthodox narrative. Franko's "heretic" narrative turns the national icon, the Polish saint, into an image of a diabolical figure. I will not go into the details of Franko's argument, in which he clearly ignores the literary tradition and convention. However, I would like to emphasise the final sentence of the essay, in which Franko states: "what a sad condition of a nation it must be, when it believes such a poet without reservation as their greatest national hero and prophet [...]" (Franko, 1897, 89).¹

The essay created problems for Brandes. Polish intellectuals felt offended by Franko's narrative and Brandes, their guest and ally, found it extremely embarrassing to be quoted by the "heretic" literary scholar. During his visit to Krakow and Lemberg in November 1898, he attempted to distance himself from Franko and his Ruthenian supporters, swearing that he had never called Mickiewicz "a poet of betrayal". If Brandes had authorised Franko's narrative, he would have undermined his own, in which the political situation of the Polish nation justified the Machiavellian ethics – the ethics of the oppressed, colonised nation. However, Franko inverted this interpretation of cultural resources, emphasising the violent, oppressive, "vicious" character of the "national spirit", as found in Mickiewicz's work.

What becomes clear in this context is the relative character of every narrative, which entails an interpretation of cultural resources. Georg Brandes seems not to be aware that the resources were open to other uses, interpretations and narratives. Ivan Franko showed how the perspective could be changed, building a revisionist, subversive narrative on Brandes' unifying, prospective and conciliatory one.

Conclusion

Brandes approaches nations and cultures with an eye to outlining the concept of difference. What matters are differences between nations, the differences which define nations. The diversity and originality of nations (reflecting the diversity of life and its forms) gives civilisation its shape. There is no progress and no civilised world without free nations. It is on such presuppositions that Brandes based his liberal narrative on the subject of the nation and the nation-state. He created historical narratives which tell stories of nations, sympathising with those who are oppressed and hindered in their quest for independence. Brandes' narrative about Poland can be seen as such a story – a brilliant narrative which cannot resist the pressure of intertexts.

Postcolonial studies demonstrate that there are two kinds of historical narratives: linear narrative, with a tendency to subordinate, and non-linear, nomadic, counterpoint-like narratives. The author of *Indtryk fra Polen* holds on to a linear, monolithic narrative which transforms the

¹ My translation. In original: "traurig muss es mit einer Nation beschaffen sein, welche einen solchen Dichter ohne Vorbehalt als ihren höchsten Nationalheroen und Propheten betrachtet [...]"

existing difference into a liberal idea of difference in unity and communion – into the paradox of national cosmopolitanism. However, the existing differences clash with his "meaningful" thoughts and ideas. Ambivalence, conflict, uncertainty and the reversal of values come with local narratives, which disseminate Brandes' rational, liberal concept of nation and undermine his narrative. If the nation is a narrative strategy – as Bhabha puts it in *The Location of Culture* (1994, 140, 145), it is a game played in the realm of conflict. I have attempted to sketch this field of conflict, locating Georg Brandes' narrative about Poland in the space of difference and conflicting narratives.

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Biographical note

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